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Boehner Faces the First Days of New Power in Congress

by Carl Hulse And Jeremy W. Peters

Nov. 30, 2014

WASHINGTON — John A. Boehner does not want to be remembered as the Shutdown Speaker. As Congress returns from recess on Monday facing a Dec. 11 deadline for funding the government, Mr. Boehner and his fellow Republican leaders are working to persuade the rank and file — furious over President Obama’s executive action on immigration — that engaging in a spending confrontation is the wrong way to counter the White House. That would set the wrong tone, they argue, as Republicans prepare to take over Congress and fulfill promises to govern responsibly.

He made his views clear on Nov. 13, when House Republicans gathered in the Capitol for their first meeting since their emphatic sweep on Election Day. Representative Vicky Hartzler of Missouri posed the question on everyone’s mind: How was the leader of the enlarged and emboldened House majority going to respond if Mr. Obama unilaterally eased the threat of deportation for millions of illegal immigrants?

Mr. Boehner, according to those present, promised to fight the president “tooth and nail.” But he warned that the party members needed to coalesce around a strategy that gives them a stronger chance of success in combating Mr. Obama. Only Republicans, he said, would be blamed for a shutdown, just as they were last year.

“Shutting down the entire government over something never did make sense to the American people, still doesn’t and won’t in the future,” said Senator Richard M. Burr, a North Carolina Republican who is part of Mr. Boehner’s inner circle. Like other Boehner insiders, he believes that the speaker, bolstered by election victories, is looking beyond the immediate fight.

“There is certainly an opportunity for him to put his mark on the largest Republican House majority in a long time,” Mr. Burr said. “To me, that is a big motivating factor.”

Mr. Boehner’s approaching third term as speaker holds both promise and peril.

He is expected to be re-elected easily when the 114th Congress convenes on Jan. 6, unlike two years ago when a divided Republican conference embarrassed him with an uncomfortably close vote. This time his deputies are carefully counting their support, leaving nothing to chance. His majority — likely to be 247 seats after a few undecided races are settled — will be the largest any Republican speaker has had since 1929, so large that it is approaching the size that Democrats had in the 1960s when they solidified control of the House that endured for decades.

But what he is able to do with that power will determine whether he is remembered as something more than the House leader during a stretch of frustrating gridlock and deep partisanship.

“He’s never wanted to just be speaker,” said Representative Tom Cole, an Oklahoma Republican and a close ally. “He’s wanted to be a historically significant speaker.”

A spending agreement would represent a significant victory for the party establishment over more conservative lawmakers and activists spoiling for a shutdown confrontation. It would also put his new House on a potential path to enacting the kinds of big legislation — on budgetary issues, tax reform and energy policy — that he envisions.

Aides say that Mr. Boehner, who unsuccessfully pursued a grand budget deal with Mr. Obama but still oversaw significant federal spending reductions, would like to advance major legislation — but that the president’s immigration move could prove a major obstacle.

“The president’s unilateral action on immigration will make every issue more difficult,” said Kevin Smith, a spokesman for Mr. Boehner, who declined through his office to be interviewed. “While the speaker is never going to give up on pushing for tax and entitlement reform because it is the right thing to do for our economy, he is realistic about what can be accomplished with this president.”

Democrats are skeptical that Mr. Boehner can deliver in the months ahead, based on what they saw as his refusal to stand up to his conference over the first shutdown and his inability to break any immigration legislation loose.

“He always says he would like to do something more, but can’t deliver,” said Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, the senior Democrat on the Budget Committee. “I hope I am wrong, but I don’t see that changing. He has more members, but the Tea Party still holds sway in his caucus.”

If Mr. Boehner is able to mollify his right flank by pushing back hard enough against the president, he has good reason to believe his standing will remain strong heading into 2016. He has no obvious challengers from within his inner circle.

In one of the less foreseeable twists of the Tea Party defeat of Eric Cantor, Mr. Boehner's former No. 2, the conservative forces that toppled Mr. Cantor actually helped the speaker strengthen the establishment's grip on House leadership.

With the departure of Mr. Cantor, who was seen as a potential alternative if dissatisfaction with Mr. Boehner reached a boiling point, the speaker and his allies are no longer looking over their shoulders. They have reliable lieutenants in Representatives Kevin McCarthy of California as the new majority leader and Steve Scalise of Louisiana as the majority whip.

Even the new head of the Republican Study Committee — the conservative bloc that bedeviled Mr. Boehner in the past — has indicated its members intend to be more cooperative and keep policy disagreements more private.

“Over the last several months I have seen us become a lot more cohesive than we have been in the past, and it is a good time to have that happen,” said Representative Bill Flores, the Texan newly elected to head the group, adding that differences between leadership and rank-and-file conservatives had narrowed.

This new tone — if it holds — is in large part by Mr. Boehner's own design. Beginning in January, Mr. Boehner will have more votes to spare because of the gain of a dozen seats in the midterm elections, allowing him a cushion to push through legislation even if he loses some conservatives.

He personally campaigned for some of the new freshmen members, working the Northeast particularly hard to elect Republicans he saw as more pragmatic who could balance the arrival of those on the far right.

“For people who tend to underestimate John, this is a majority he grew,” said Newt Gingrich, the former Republican speaker. “He now has his majority leader, his whip. He's raised an enormous amount of money. He deserves a lot of credit.”

Mr. Boehner did 150 events for candidates across the country this year. He raised \$102 million for this year's elections and transferred \$23 million from his own political action committees to the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Members of the House leadership said in interviews that they had begun laying the groundwork that they hoped would make the conference more manageable. But because Congress has not functioned as an orderly law making body for so long, they find themselves having to educate members on the basics of legislating.

Mr. Boehner's confidants say he appears more upbeat and assured than ever. Mr. Cole said he believed that the shutdown last year, as damaging as it was to Republicans, had only

strengthened the speaker's hand because many of the more rebellious members came to see that he was right.

Mr. Cole recalled a dinner with Mr. Boehner in the midst of the shutdown:

“I said to the speaker, ‘Why in the world are we letting the guys who didn’t vote for you drive the conference?’ And you get that typical Boehner: ‘Well, I learned a long time ago if you’re a leader and nobody’s following you, you’re just a guy out for a walk.’ ”

Author's Purpose:

Intended Audience:

Author's Point of View on the Subject:

Explain a connection that you can make between this article and *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*.